

MIKE PRIDE photos

The crew of the USCGC Juniper repairs a six-ton buoy at the mouth of Narragansett Bay. The ship's commanding officer is Concord's Rick Wester (below).

Day aboard Coast Guard cutter shows me new slice of New England life

By **MIKE PRIDE**
Monitor columnist

Here is a sentence I never expected to write: On a perfect New England morning in July, we stood on the bridge of a Coast Guard cutter at the mouth of Narragansett Bay and watched through the captain's window as a crane hoisted a six-ton buoy onto the deck.

Before my retirement became a reality, I envisioned it as a time to do things we had always wanted to do and to say yes to new experiences that life offered. The expedition on the Juniper fell into the latter category.

Last year, the cutter's commanding officer, Rick Wester, who went to high school with one of our sons, invited Monique and me aboard for a buoy-tending mission. He even said we could bring along our grandchildren. We wanted to go,

but work intervened. When he offered a rain-check this year, we gladly accepted.

Wester grew up in the South End and graduated from Concord High in 1989. He went on to the Coast Guard Academy, where he earned a degree in marine science and a commission as an ensign, and to the University of Georgia, where he got his master's degree in mass communications. Today, he is a good-natured lieutenant commander who leads a crew of 40 men and women with quiet confidence.

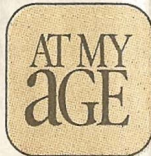
With our two Massachusetts grandchildren, 7-year-old Grace and 4-year-old Jackson, we arrived for the excursion shortly before 7 a.m. Everything interests Grace, who wants to be a scientist. As for Jackson, fixing buoys is not exactly cap-

turing pirates, but it was not a stretch to suggest to him that should we encounter pirates, the cutter was just the vessel to chase them down.

The Juniper works out of Newport, R.I., once home to a full-fledged naval base. The first ships you see as you approach the Juniper's dock are two decommissioned carriers, the Saratoga and the Forrestal.

John McCain flew missions to North Vietnam off the Forrestal. In fact, in July 1967, an accidentally misfired rocket that may have struck the fuel tank of McCain's jetfighter caused a fire aboard the Forrestal that killed 134 men, injured 161 and destroyed 21 planes. One day soon, the Forrestal is expected to be sunk as an artificial reef.

Our mission posed no such perils. If



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you're like me, you're nonchalant about buoys. They seem to be permanent markers placed on the seascape long ago. Of course, it isn't so simple. Buoys are exposed to the elements and need regular maintenance. The safety of vessels and the lives of their occupants depend on their placement and condition.

Long, thick chains tether buoys to concrete sinkers. On one of the two buoys the Juniper serviced during our trip, 90 feet of chain had to be replaced. On the other, the crew removed the old battery-powered light and installed a light-emitting diode, which lasts longer and is more efficient.

There is no multi-handled wooden steering wheel on the Juniper. Computers help navigate the cutter and hold it in position when necessary. Screens give up-to-date figures on depth and distances. In placing buoys, computers, and the knowledge it takes to use them, have also replaced sextants and their highly educated guesses. This work occurs on the bridge, the structure at the ship's center.

The physical labor is done on the buoy deck, in full view of the bridge. A crane lifts the buoy onto

USCGC JUNIPER, BY THE NUMBERS

Length: 225 feet

Buoy deck: 2,875 square feet

Crew: 6 officers, 34 enlisted

Crane: 20 tons with a 63-foot extension

Maximum speed: 17 knots

Range: 6,000 nautical miles

the deck, and the work crew rolls the chain onto a spool, inspects the sinker and cleans and repairs the buoy.

The pace of the work is deliberate, its every aspect recorded. If a ship has an accident and its captain blames a buoy's placement or condition, the written record provides the Coast Guard with a detailed history of the buoy.

During our voyage, we decided Grace was old enough to climb the

steel ladder to the top of the bridge. The front edge of the roof proved to be the perfect spot for grandfather and granddaughter to observe the work on the buoy below and look beyond to the bay and its dozens of sailboats. Drifting toward the horizon, they looked like white parentheses on blue. As we watched, we talked, but not about buoys.

Monique and Jackson, meanwhile, were taking a break in Wester's cabin, one deck below the bridge. The cabin consists of a bedroom, a bathroom and an all-purpose room of about 10-by-16 feet with comfy chairs and a television. Wester knows 4-year-olds, having one of his own, and he had DVDs aboard to entertain the ship's youngest sailor.

Plaques and framed certificates on the walls chronicle Wester's Coast Guard career. He has traversed the Panama Canal, served in Hawaii, journeyed to the Far East, broken ice on rivers during a Great Lakes winter and replaced buoys in Iraq.

Wester has taken his cutter south to patrol for boats carrying Cubans attempting to enter the United States illegally. After one interdiction, he said, a gale threat-

ened the safety of the Cubans, who were sheltered by a large tent on the Juniper's buoy deck. Wester ordered the fantail turned toward the wind so that the bridge protected the tent from the wind. The gale lashed the fantail, but only a mild breeze reached the foredeck.

Wester had another challenge, too. Even in high winds, he had to maneuver the ship to keep the Cubans from seeing the Florida coast. If they saw it, he feared, some might jump overboard and try to swim to shore. Reaching U.S. territory improves the status of a foreigner trying to enter the country without papers.

In New England, members of Wester's crew have boarded vessels to make sure fishermen abide by regulations intended to protect against over-fishing. At times the Juniper also serves in New York City's East River as part of the plan to evacuate the United Nations in an emergency.

We saw no pirates during our six hours at sea, a disappointment to our grandson. But through Wester's hospitality, and through his front window, we got a close-up view of a world we had scarcely imagined.